

Shanghai Talk: August 2006

Contributed by SAA Team
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All Shanghai's a Stage

When Karl Ignaczak first came to Shanghai a year and a half ago, he found that there was little information (especially in English) for aspiring actors. Where to find news of acting opportunities and auditions? What's the going rate for extras in commercials? Are people making low-budget independent films? Do they need talent? Are there agents representing foreign actors in the city?

Answerless, Karl took matters into his own hands and founded the Shanghai Actors Association (SAA. www.saa.org.cn). SAA meetings help actors get together and network, while on the website, actors can upload their headshots and resumes, talk shop in the forums, and keep up to date on trends with Karl's blog (www.planetkarl.com)

The scene has received a boost due to the collaboration between Karl and TangHui co-owner Morry Morgan Morry produced a variation on the Rocky Horror Picture Show in Shanghai in 2003 and subsequently joined the team at the now incarnation of TangHui. His vision was for more than just a spacious update of the old place; with four floors and plenty of theatrical facilities (DVD projectors, stages, sound systems) Morry pictured TangHui becoming a home for various artistic communities in Shanghai.

Together, Karl and Morry came up with the "Acting Up" concept, to be held once or twice a month on Monday nights. 7:30pm, at TangHui. Acting Up is like an open mic night for people interested in acting, musical theater and poetry/spoken word. It's a forum for people to polish their monologues, hold script readings, and of course, meet other actors.

A recent Monday night gathering began with Karl hosting an improvisational acting "game show" not unlike the television show "Whose Line Is It Anyway?" where four contestants engage in a competition based on simple rules. For example, give two actors the basic outline of a scene, and then ask them to somehow to work in idioms such as "The eagle has landed at twelve o'clock" or "If you were a shoe, would you have heels?" Actors have to think on their feet and play off each other; the results can be a bit random, and participants often go off on tangents that perhaps only they understand, but that's part of the fun.

Still, it's been a slow start

for Acting Up, both because of the World Cup and the fact that it just takes time for the word to spread. Nonetheless, there is a steadily growing corps of thespian regulars at TangHui on Monday nights, and this has helped the East-West Theater Company (EWTC), a spin-off of the SAA, attract people for their upcoming projects.

As their name suggests, the EWTC is a place where the twain shall meet. Their bridge to the Chinese community is Tim Zhu, a local actor who first found out about Karl and the SAA from the Internet. Tim now serves as a liaison to the local community on the board of the EWTC. Of course, he's an actor first and foremost, but as the company is still predominantly made up of foreigners, most of Tim's acting experience has been in his second language, including "Night of Mirth"; the EWTC's first production.

Asked about the challenge of acting in a second language, he describes it as "Quite exciting, especially on stage, where you can clearly see and feel the audience's reaction; you breathe together."

The EWTC has used several of the Monday night gatherings at TangHui to plan, rehearse and spread the word about their upcoming bilingual English Chinese murder mystery (set for late September) as well as other theater projects for the fall. The murder mystery is the brainchild of Rob Tromp, an American firmware engineer who got his start as a "Nazi extra" in a production of "The Sound of Music" and soon fell in love with acting. One of the genres he likes is the interactive murder mystery, which, unlike traditional theater pieces, involves improvisation on the part of the actors because there is direct interaction with the participants, whose aim is to guess the identity of the killer.

Part of the reason why Rob, who is heading the EWTC this season, opted for this type of production is because he believes the genre is uniquely suited to EWTC's mission of bringing theater to larger audiences, both local and expat. Rob believes that Shanghai could very well become another cultural stronghold in China but only by embracing a "fusion culture" that combines elements of foreign and Chinese culture. This belief is reflected in the plot of the murder mystery, where participants have to find out who was responsible for a double murder at a wedding between a Chinese and an American movie star. There will be both Chinese and English speaking characters, which will make the event accessible to participants that only speak one or the other. Don't expect exorbitantly priced tickets either: especially in these early stages, the folks of the EWTC are more focused on reaching as wide an audience as possible, rather than operating a for-profit theater company.